Barolo - what's so great about 2008

7 Jun 2012 by Walter Speller

See our Nebbiolo guide for a full list of articles and tasting notes from the 2012 Nebbiolo Prima. Here's why Walter thinks we should all buy Barolo 2008s.

This May I spent a full week in the north of Italy, in the town of Alba, to taste the latest releases from the Langhe: Barolo, Barbareso and Roero (the novice's introduction to Nebbiolo par excellence). In this all-encompassing tasting, the 2008 Barolo rose above all other wines as one of exceptional quality and style, and so supercharged with tannin that it needs - and deserves - prolonged cellaring.

It has taken a little while for 2008 to come into shape and give us a glimpse of its magnitude through all that bold tannin, especially compared with last year's seductive and plush 2007 Barolo. Although not without challenges to the growers, a long and cool rather than hot growing cycle resulted in healthy, thick-skinned Nebbiolo grapes full of extract and high sugar levels, balanced by great acidity. And although in most cases the tannins are unyielding for the moment, these powerful wines have all the ingredients for a significant gain in complexity and depth for years to come.

Unapproachable now in most cases, these wines repay cellaring, and most will need a decade to divulge their fine, heady aromas of dried fruit, candied orange, roses and tar. Buying 2008 Barolo makes complete sense - it is the perfect investment for people who want to cellar these wines in order to experience the mystique of Barolo, something it will reveal only after prolonged cellaring. These fine wines are old-fashioned in that they are not crafted for immediate consumption and 2008 is a high-quality, classic vintage, showing Nebbiolo's transparency when it comes to revealing terroir. But there is irregularity between the wines and the Barolo communes, and wine lovers are advised to choose with care. See my tasting notes on almost 200 Barolo 2008s.

This week's Langhe reports offer extensive coverage not only of all the 2008 Barolos, but also the latest releases of Roero and Barbaresco 2009, all tasted under blind conditions during the en primeur Nebbiolo Prima. The total of 350 or so tasting notes that this yielded also includes my assessment of the 2006 Barolo Riservas (to be published tomorrow) and 2007 Barbaresco.

These reports on all the new releases from one of Italy's most important fine-wine regions are the most comprehensive and timely of their kind, delivering a full overview of the 2008s and 2009s, and with tasting notes on all wines presented at Nebbiolo Prima, not just a list of personal favourites. They are enhanced by in-depth descriptions of individual vintages and communes, allowing the reader to conjure up a complete image of the quality, style and potential of 2008.

It is worth remembering that Barolo 2008s are available on the market now, without the timelag, uncertainty and prepayment required when buying Bordeaux en primeur. One should buy the best and buy now.

I would urge any lover of Italian wine to snap them up and cellar them. Although 2010 looks promising, it will be a while before a vintage of the class of 2008 comes along again. The best wines of this vintage are bound to become rare because, unlike Bordeaux, for example, these wines are collected and cellared to be drunk, rather than traded on the secondary market and offered at auction.